Truth and Authority
Acts 5:33-42
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Gamaliel, descendent of the great Rabbi Hillel, President of the Sanhedrin, a revered teacher and interpreter of the Jewish law, is one of those intriguing figures which emerges out of the Biblical narrative, about which we know all too little. I've always felt that the words of Gamaliel before the Sanhedrin, as recorded in the fifth chapter of acts, were extremely significant, but I never could decide exactly why. To be sure, had Gamaliel not said what he did, Peter and several other apostles well may have been executed. But the significance I have felt in his words is lodged on a deeper level than a mere stop-gap measure which prevented a hasty execution. I've never used this text for a sermon before - because of my inablility to get beyond my feeling that it was significant. This week I decided to try, and I invite you to think with me as we struggle together to hear the word of God.

It is necessary, first, to understand the situation. The place is Jerusalem: the time - several months after the death, resurrection and ascension of Jesus. The few Christians in the city had become suddenly aggressive: their love and care for each other was not only conspicuous, but apparently very compelling to the casual observer. They told their story at every opportunity, and as they did the constituted religious and civil authorities got nervous. We must remember that several months prior these same authorities had successfully concluded the case of "the people vs. Jesus of Nazareth". And now the friends of the man they had crucified were gaining strength and support. So they arrested Peter, the chief trouble-maker, along with several others and threw them in prison. When the time came for them to appear before the body which was both court and legislature - the Sanhedrin - they were gone. Something very strange was happening. The prisoners had disappeared - but they hadn't gone far. They

were found again teaching and telling their story in the temple. Again they were arrested and brought before the court. Almost apologetically the authorities reiterated the charges against them: they had persisted in teaching false doctrine, and to make matters worse they were blaming the authorities for the crucifixion of their dead hero. Peter's defense included the famous statement "We must obey God rather than men", and proceeded to repeat the offensive message" "You crucified God's son - we are the witnesses - he is our Lord and Savior."

It is at this point that our scripture lesson begins. The Sanhedrin was angry - the tension was very thick. These common Gallileans were arrogantly flaunting every established authority. One solution was to execute these men with dispatch, a course of action which is always suggested whenever constituted authority is challenged. Then Gamaliel rose and said some very thoughtful and wise words: he counseled moderation: he pointed out that other movements such as this had withered and died. "Keep clear of these men. Let them alone. For if this idea of theirs or its execution is of human origin, it will collapse; but if it is from God, you will never be able to put them down, and you risk finding yourselves at war with God." [Acts 5:38-39]

And so the Apostles were flogged and set free with the pathetic reminder that they were still under injunction to cease speaking about Jesus. Whereupon, Acts reports, "they went steadily on with their teaching in the temple and in private houses, telling the good news of Jesus the Messiah."

Now, that is what we might call Civil Disobedience, but it is not what I would have us think about this morning. I am interested in the words and position of Gamaliel - this philosophic and political Laissez faire that would allow every idea the freedom to be expressed and tried in the intellectual market place.

Gamaliel seemed to be saying that history will weed out its own errors;

that the truth or error of an idea will be proven, in time, by its reception or rejection by people. And in fact, one of the compelling arguments for the truth and validity of Christianity is simply that it has lived in the market place of ideas for 2,000 years. Gamaliel may have been saying this along - "let's wait and see."

But I have the feeling that there is a little more involved. What I think I hear him saying at this point is that authority - political, moral or religious authority is based on truth. And truth is determined by human experience. Another way of saying it is that the only authority that is worth anything is authority that is voluntarily accepted because people have seen and experienced its basis in truth. That has always been a radical idea. It was eloquently voiced nearly 200 years ago when the colonists got themselves together and declared their political independence on the basis of "self-evident" truths.

Let's assume that this is what Gamaliel meant and look,now at some of the implications that present themselves. The noble end of all education is the discovery of truth. What that means is that education is the business of suggesting to people what their "authorities" should be. When truth is discovered, some kind of authority is established. When scientists determined that the earth was round, and not flat, that became an authoritarian definition of truth on the basis of which men could begin to do certain things - like sailing into the ocean without the fear of falling off.

The trouble is that whenever men begin to search for the truth, the constituted authorities automatically feel threatened. Their power is dependent on the going concept of truth. If a new truth is discovered, they may find themselves out of business. Thus the Chruch, in the middle ages, excommunicated men for suggesting that the earth is round, that the sun is at the center of the solar system and that gravity is a product of that unique relationship between a rotating earth revolving around a focal

sun. The Church opposed that kind of talk because its very suggestion meant that truth just might be found somewhere outside the collected wisdom of the ecclesiastical minds - and that, in turn, meant that there was an authority outside the jurisdiction of the Church.

You see, while men have suggested that authority is determined by truth for thousands of years, they have, in fact, usually ended up acting as if the reverse were true: authority determines what is true. That was the basic position of the Sanhedrin which Gamaliel succeeded in moderating. They were the authority: they would decide what is true. Peter represented untruth - but more importantly a threat to their authority.

Dictators know the value of this formula very well. If authority determines what is true, political dictatorship is always possible. No one ever understood that quite as thoroughly as Adolf Hitler. The Nazi movement elevated the concept of authority and its correspondent, obedience, far above all other virtues. Drawing on the historical German penchant for authority the Nazi's simply drove it to its logical end. They had the power: they would decide what is truth. The noblest thing a patriotic German could do was to obey. Thus it became possible to rewrite history, to create a new anthropology proving the inferiority of the Semitic race, to say that Jesus was really the son of a Germanic Roman legionaire; to invade Poland, Belgium, France, Czechoslovakia, Holland - and call it liberation. It became expedient and quite possible to censor books, art, music - every expression of the human spirit which did not conform to the authorities definition of truth.

Communism does the same thing - because it has some philosophic base as Fascisim, namely, that the man or group with authority, will determine what is true. Thus the crime against Czechoslovakia again comes out looking like a benevolent liberation: poets can be jailed or sent to Siberia because their poetry critizes the system - thus being guilty of untruth.

And no one says a word. Because a fatal philosophic corner has been turned: the authorities have been given the responsibility of defining truth.

This is why, by the way, some of us get very concerned when politicians begin to talk about censorship for the good of the people; or when the government begins to critize the freest press the world has ever known for not telling the truth. When men of authority and their institutions, their courts, legislative bodies or churches assume the right to say what is true - on behalf of other men, something very precious is lost from the fundamental concept of American Democracy. I have always felt that if we don't like pornography, for instance, we should boycott those who sell it, pickett the store, call the owner, complain to the publisher - but we ought to be very, very careful about granting to someone else the power to determine what is good, or true, for all the rest of us.

The early Apostles were dealing with a matter, ultimately, of religious authority. They were nearly stopped by a political group that had assumed the power to define the truth. They were set free by the very wise counsel of a man who recognized that if what they had to say had validity - it would be proven in the hot furnace of human experience. That is to say, if the Christian Faith has any authority today, it is because it is true, and whether or not it is true still is determined by human experience.

We live in a time when all kinds of authority finds itself called into question. Parents, who once, in a long ago and far away world, had authority over their children because they were parents, suddenly find that there is no authority apart from truth. Political institutions are called into the same kind of question, and basically it is a very healthy process, so long as those who are doing the questioning don't assume that they, alone, have all the truth. In other words, it is legitimate to question whether or not a University's authority is properly based and properly exercised - but it is not legitmate to assume that the answer is already known, and that a building

may then be burned down or a computer destroyed.

At the heart of the current authority crises and the mass rebellion against any constituted authority, I believe, is a serious religious problem. The Church, after all, claims that it has the truth and therefore an authority. As individual Christians, we claim to know the truth about God and man, and God's will for his creation. We further claim that this truth is an ultimate kind of authority which judges all men whether they agree with it or not. But is it really true? That is the question now being asked, and with which we must come to grips.

All to frequently the Church, and individual Christians get nervous, and threatened whenever anyone asks the question. In response we are inclined to sing "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible Tells me so." That's very bad theology - and the fact that the Bible says Jesus loves me really doesn't do much for the seeker of truth who will then ask - what's the Bible?

Where does religious authority come from? From your experience, and mine, or it just doesn't exist. And all the talk in the world about God's infallible word isn't going to make it exist unless you and I have experienced its truth in our own lives.

How do we know the Bible is the Word of God - and therefore true - and therefore an authority for us? Not because a Sunday School teacher or minister said it was, but only because we have found it to be so. Only because we've stood alone in grief, and heard the words "nothing separates us from the love of God" - and felt the truth of that. Only because we've felt oppressed, or guilty, or betrayed and heard the words "Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest," and felt the truth of those words. Only because we've felt badly about something we've done and encountered in the Bible the redemptive love of God that accepts us in spite of what we've done.

How do we know that Jesus is the Devine Son of God and therefore the

the ultimate authority in our lives? Not because someone told us, but because we've experienced it. Because we've looked at the record - examined the alternatives - literally tried it on - and found that it was true.

Dr. Thomas Franklyn Hudson has said, "..the pursuit of truth is never an easy matter. It is not an arm-chair discovery that we make sitting by the fireside with our pipe and bedroom slippers. It is wrought only by struggle, prayer, faith and hard work."

If the Christian Faith has little real authority for you, and I would submit that this is so for many, may I respectfully suggest that we have simply assumed its truth without ever discovering it personally? We have assumed that all religion means is acceptance of what someone else says is true.

Our faith will have meaningful authority in our lives when we expose it to human experience; when we simply - try it. Gamaliel's words remain terribly true -

> "If this idea is of human origin, it will collapse; but if it is from God, you will never be able to put them down."

Amen.

Our Father, our faith is that you are the author of all truth. Grant us the courage and deeper faith to live what we believe: to try our convictions in our lives. Grant us the assurance that there is freedom in truth - through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.